

ANTI-CRIME NETWORK: North Carolina Official Says Private Intelligence Agency Soon Will Be Keeping Tabs on Criminals in All 50 States

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There will soon be a network of private intelligence agencies, backed by federal funds, operating in all 50 states and linked together to share information on criminal activities, an official in the state attorney general's office in North Carolina said today.

"Congress supports such agencies and looks upon them favorably," said the official, John Elmore, special assistant to North Carolina Attorney General Rufus Edmisten.

"It's the only way to stay on top of the modern, mobile criminal network. Such agencies will be set up and operating in all 50 states very shortly and will be sharing information with one another," Elmore said in a telephone interview.

North Carolina Connection

The Press-Scimitar revealed yesterday that North Carolina is the channel through which the Justice Department gives \$2.3 million annually to the Regional Organized Crime Information Center in Memphis. ROCIC, which has been operating for two years behind locked doors in an elaborate suite on the 35th floor of the 100 North Main Building, is the nerve center of an intelligence network which provides information and surveillance equipment for member law-enforcement agencies in 15 states.

Jim Golden, director of criminal conspiracies for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), an agency of the Justice Department, said there are seven other such quasi-private groups operating in the United States.

However, the entire 50 states are not covered, Elmore said. He said a nationwide network is "the coming thing."

ROCIC received its federal money until recently through the Memphis Police Department, but police and city officials said they had no control over how the funds were spent. When MPD pulled out of sponsoring the grant, Elmore said, North Carolina stepped in.

The North Carolina decision to become the conduit for the funds "happened really rather casually," Elmore said. "Mr. Edmisten was formerly an assistant to Sam Ervin (former U.S. senator who won fame during the Watergate hearings), and has a lot of friends in Washington. One day, not long ago, he (Edmisten) was visiting friends in Justice and they mentioned they needed a state to become the grantee for ROCIC and wanted to know if Mr. Edmisten would do it."

"Mr. Edmisten was formerly the chief counsel of the Watergate committee and they were aware of his dedication to individual rights," Elmore said. "He said he would take over and that's how we got it."

Elmore said he and his office have no desire for direct controls on ROCIC activities.

"I don't want to know everything," Elmore said. "For instance, I had to get \$50,000 in cash for them (ROCIC operatives) to take to a place a few weeks ago. I don't want to know what they are doing with it. If there is a leak anywhere it would come back to me."

Elmore said he feels that general information, such as what undercover operation in what city the money is going to finance, enables North Carolina to have fiscal control over ROCIC.

"But I don't want to know what informers are being paid or anything like that," Elmore said.

Because of the nature of work with informers, Elmore said, "you can't expect

some of the money not to be misspent. It is virtually impossible to say money is not misspent. That is just a problem with informers."

Now Being Audited

Elmore said ROCIC's annual year-end audit by the LEAA will conclude Friday.

"They have assured us that we aren't taking over any fiscally controversial operation. They have assured us that things are straight and accounted for," he said.

ROCIC's top man is Rex Armistead, 49, a former criminal intelligence officer of the Mississippi Highway Patrol.

Armistead, said Golden, is the man who helped put together the other seven quasi-private intelligence agencies.

Congress has just appropriated \$11 million for these agencies and the money will be funneled through the Justice Department, Golden said.

Elmore said he thinks the money should be sent directly to the agencies from the Justice Department, instead of channeled through a state or city group.

"But Justice doesn't want to do this," he said. "The fact that Congress is now funding these agencies directly through Justice shows how much Congress thinks of the work being done."

Accused of Spying

Civil libertarians across the country are concerned that ROCIC and its counterparts may be spying on innocent private citizens as well as crime figures.

"Not so," said Elmore, "we are not involved in domestic intelligence."

Nevertheless, the West Tennessee chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union is making inquiries.

"They won't get anywhere," Elmore said.

He said that because the agency is a private corporation formed by member law enforcement groups, the intelligence files which it has "are not the property of ROCIC. For instance, if North Carolina feeds some information into ROCIC, that information remains the property of North Carolina — not ROCIC."

"The agency is just a clearinghouse for information. In order to obtain information contained in files, the individual states and member law enforcement groups, to whom the information belongs, would have to be sued individually."

Files Kept Secret

Under the Freedom of Information Act, federal agencies, such as the FBI, must turn over information contained in their files to individuals upon request. However, because of the private status of groups such as ROCIC, Elmore believes FOI requirements do not apply and groups such as the ACLU must trust the word of officials who claim no domestic intelligence information finds its way into such files.

Not all the work that ROCIC does is strictly that of a passive clearinghouse operation, Elmore said.

"When requested," Elmore said, "sometimes they (ROCIC officials) will help a member agency in debriefing an informer, or advise them in setting up an undercover operation."

Elmore said he did not think it was strange for North Carolina to be serving as the channel through which money is funneled to a Tennessee-based agency. He said the state attorney general's office does not have personnel assigned to the ROCIC office, but he said he "will be in and out visiting."

Elmore said that ROCIC operates "field headquarters" in all of the 15 states it cov-

ers. Its area extends from North Carolina to Florida on the east and from Oklahoma to the Texas-Mexican border on the west.

Officials say ROCIC has a sophisticated communications system second only to that of the White House and provides super-sensitive electronics and camera equipment to its selective member law-enforcement agencies. Elmore said, as did Armistead in the earlier interview, that all law enforcement agencies which apply for membership are not accepted. Some are rejected as security risks.

That reflects the value of ROCIC, he said.

"The members know each other and know which law enforcement agencies can be trusted with information and which cannot," Elmore said. "Those which cannot are not admitted."

Elmore said he felt ROCIC "provides a badly needed service" which is not provided by the federal law enforcement agencies.

Money Available

Any member agency may call and request use of surveillance devices. Money for travel and other expenses may also be given members because local law enforcement budgets for sophisticated criminal investigations are generally low or nonexistent.

Reception to Honor St. Peter Director

Sister Ann Legeay, who will leave the executive director's post at St. Peter Home for Children May 31 to become a parish nun in Whitesville, Ky., will be honored at a 2 p.m. public reception tomorrow at St. Peter.

A mass will be held at 11 a.m. at St. Peter Chapel.

In order to "qualify" for a place in the files of ROCIC, a person must be a convicted felon in three or more jurisdictions and be known as a "traveling criminal" who moves between states as part of a criminal activity, ROCIC officials said.

"There's nothing secret about the operation," Elmore said. "We don't need a listed telephone number. Our members know where we are and have the phone number. There's nothing strange about our having our door locked, either. We have women in there at night working the switchboard."

Security Is Tight

The door is also locked during the day and visitors must identify themselves after ringing a bell. A peephole allows those inside to see who is in the hallway seeking admission. ROCIC officials say they soon plan to put a camera on each side of the doorway.

Elmore said anyone, upon request, can go in and look through the suite.

"But we can't have television cameras and photographers running through the place and taking a picture of our layout."

"Criminals could use those pictures in order to get to know the layout and break in," he said.

Sister Ann is the last of a line of Sisters of Charity to run the facility, which has been staffed by members of that religious order for more than a century. She has been with St. Peter since 1975.

Sister Ann will be replaced by Sister Mary Paul Hickey of Pittsburgh, a member of the Sisters of Mercy.